

# DROPOUT DYNAMICS AND POST-DROPOUT TRAJECTORIES IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING: ROLE OF ATTITUDES, SOCIAL IDENTITY AND WELL-BEING

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## Abstract

*This study explores the dynamics of dropout and post-dropout trajectories of young people in vocational education and training (VET), focusing on attitudes, social identity, and well-being. It studied whether students were pushed away from the educational institution because of school-related issues, pulled due to other commitments, or disengaged. Besides, it explored students' post-dropout paths, such as pursuing higher qualifications (upward dropout), changing their educational program (horizontal dropout), or leaving the education system altogether (downward dropout). The methodology involved survey research with 300 former VET students selected through convenience sampling and nine focus groups. The average dropout duration was 5.4 months, with lower socioeconomic status linked to shorter dropout periods. Institutional factors were the primary drivers of dropping-out over which students had limited influence. Students often made uninformed decisions about dropout. "Downward dropout" was prominent, especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged students, often leading them to unemployment or low-skilled employment. Many young people expressed interest in continuing VET programs, while some opted for higher education or employment. Less than 1/5th had no plans, increasing the risk of becoming NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) who need support. Social identity and attitudes towards VET and Higher Education (HE) were significant predictors of an upward post-dropout trajectory. The most positive attitudes and the highest well-being rates were observed in the group that continued their studies in VET. These findings underscore the importance of developing evidence-based interventions to assist young people in navigating vocational education pathways.*

**Keywords:** Vocational Education and Training (VET), dropout from VET, educational barriers, students' attitudes, social identity, well-being

## Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs play a vital role in preparing learners for work by equipping them with industry-specific skills, competencies, and hands-on experience. However, dropout rates, which are a challenging issue in VET, create significant implications for individuals, institutions, and society as a whole. Dropping out of vocational education typically refers to the decision of a student to discontinue a vocational education program prior to achieving the final qualifications or vocational diploma (Zidărescu, 2009).

Dropping out of VET delays individuals' career prospects on the one hand and represents a loss of human capital and investment in education. Youth who drop out of Vocational Education find

low-skilled jobs, earn less money, and have limited career progression opportunities (Patzina et al., 2020). Research shows that individuals at risk of dropping out are more susceptible to experiences of depression, dissatisfaction with life, and social isolation, often accompanied by mental and physical health problems. Concurrently, they often have mental and physical health problems. Acquiring relevant competencies for employment contributes to socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and income disparity (Rumberger, 1987). Therefore, it is essential to understand the determinants of dropout in VET and post-dropout trajectories to develop effective intervention strategies.

Dropping out of vocational education has material and non-material consequences for the labour market (Campbell, 2015; Hällsten, 2017). It results in a loss of human and social capital, which means that people lose skills and connections, reducing job opportunities, wages, and raising unemployment rates. Consequently, these individuals contribute less to the country's socioeconomic development, pay fewer taxes, and rely more heavily on public assistance programs and the healthcare sector (Christle et al., 2007).

Dropout rates in VET pose a significant challenge in Georgia and worldwide, with considerable variation across countries. For instance, the dropout rate in Germany is, on average, 20%, but this figure varies significantly by sector. In Denmark, this figure is 20% (2017) and 16% in the Netherlands (2019). By 2021, 9.7% of 18-24-year-olds in the European Union (11.4% of men and 7.9% of women) had discontinued their studies at an early stage (Eurostat, 2021). These rates differ significantly among member states, ranging from 2.4% in Croatia to 15.3% in Romania. The Lisbon strategy anticipated decreasing the EU's dropout rate to 10% by 2020, a benchmark many nations have already met. However, this issue remains a top priority within the European Union's educational policy agenda, aiming to decrease it to less than 9% by 2030 (Eurostat, 2021).

Socioeconomic factors strongly influence the decision to discontinue studies, with individuals from low-income backgrounds often citing employment or family-related reasons for withdrawal. Among disadvantaged groups, a significant proportion face educational discontinuation, ranging from 30% to 35%. Conversely, those from higher socioeconomic strata are more likely to pursue alternative educational or employment opportunities (ACT, 2020).

One of the studies (Kitiashvili et al., 2016) identified the predominant reasons for dropout, primarily associated with family economic circumstances and the pursuit of employment opportunities. Despite efforts to secure employment, a significant portion of dropouts remained unemployed (about 66%) or engaged in low-skilled, low-paying jobs.

Understanding the dynamics of the dropout phenomenon in vocational education requires a comprehensive approach that covers individual-level factors and broader socio-cultural contexts. This approach encompasses various factors, such as academic difficulties, lack of motivation, financial constraints, and social factors, that prematurely affect individuals' decisions to leave educational programs.

Post-dropout trajectories encompass the pathways that individuals pursue after leaving vocational education programs. Some students may choose to continue their education by pursuing higher qualifications, referred to as "upward dropout." Others might opt for a "horizontal dropout," where they switch to a different educational program or institution without necessarily advancing their qualifications. Alternatively, some may leave the education system entirely, a pathway known as "downward dropout," which often leads to entering the workforce directly, sometimes in low-skilled jobs, or drifting into unemployment.

Social psychological concepts provide valuable frameworks for understanding dropout dynamics, emphasizing the role of attitudes, social identity, locus of control, and well-being in shaping educational outcomes. Positive attitudes towards education influence students' engagement in their studies and often correlate with higher levels of motivation and commitment. Social identity, which refers to students' sense of identification with their educational institution and peers, significantly impacts their willingness to remain in school. A strong, positive social identity can foster resilience and a sense of community, making students more likely to stay engaged. The locus of control plays a crucial role in students' perceptions of their ability to affect their educational outcomes. Individuals with an internal locus of control believe they have control over their life events and outcomes.

Problem Statement

High dropout rates in vocational education programs pose significant challenges to individuals, institutions, and society. This delays career prospects and leads to a loss of human capital and educational investment (Johnson et al., 2021).

Studies show that dropouts have similar characteristics: high risk of depression, life dissatisfaction and social isolation, a lack of employability skills and more. Determinants of dropout from vocational education and subsequent trajectories of these individuals are less researched in Georgia, which is essential for developing intervention strategies.

The enrollment process for vocational colleges requires significant effort, including document collection, registration, and potential interviews or exams. Despite these efforts, many students drop out shortly after enrollment. It is assumed that the decision to drop out is less influenced by students' attitudes or motivations and more by external factors beyond their control.

Understanding the dynamics of dropping out requires a comprehensive approach that considers the broader socio-cultural context and individual-level factors. Furthermore, post-dropout trajectories significantly affect individuals' prospects in further education, employment, or other endeavors (Anderson, 2020). Social psychological factors, including attitudes, social identity, and well-being, are crucial in shaping educational outcomes. Despite their importance, these factors remain under-researched in the literature, especially in the context of Georgia, highlighting the novelty of this research (Brown & Lee, 2021).

Research Objectives

- The research aims to address the following issues:
- 1. What are the main characteristics of vocational students who have left educational institutions, such as age, gender, education level, socio-economic status, and parental education?
  - 2. Which factors, categorized as push, pull, or falling, contribute to dropout?
  - 3. Which social psychological factors influence dropout in VET, such as attitudes, social identity, and well-being?
  - 4. What trajectory do students follow upon dropout: upward, downward, or horizontal?

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- Hypothesis 1 (H1):** The decision to discontinue VET programs may be influenced less by the individual attitudes or motivations of students and more by external factors, such as socioeconomic status or family circumstances.
- Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Dropout rates may be primarily driven by “pull factors,” such as employment opportunities or peer influence, rather than by internal factors like academic disengagement.
- Hypothesis 3 (H3):** A significant decrease in dropout rates is expected due to both socioeconomic backgrounds and the urgent need for employment among youth.
- Hypothesis 4 (H4):** Individuals with positive attitudes towards education (VET or /and HE) are more likely to have an upward trajectory.
- Hypothesis 5 (H5):** Individuals who perceive a stronger identification with vocational education and feel a sense of belonging to VET are less likely to have a downward trajectory.

Theoretical Framework

Research on dropping out of VET began only a few decades ago. In the 1970s, Johnson (1968) made significant contributions to this area of research in Canada, and Grieger et al. (1981) and Weiss (1982) in Germany laid the foundational groundwork for subsequent research endeavors (Krötz,

2024). Later, a comprehensive framework was developed to categorize dropout reasons into three main types: push, pull, and falling out (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt & Roessingh, 1994).

Push factors are associated with school circumstances that push a student out of the educational system due to structural, contextual, or individual issues (Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Krötz & Deutscher, 2022). Pull factors are external influences such as financial pressures or family obligations that obstruct a student’s ability to continue their education (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Falling out is a gradual disengagement from academic pursuits due to low achievement and lack of support (Jordan et al., 1994).

These three approaches involve different agents. Schools are the driving force behind the push factors; students are the primary agents for the pull factors, where various distractions lead to their departure from school. Falling out factors describe circumstances that neither the school nor the student can influence, and the student gradually loses connection with the school.

Research indicates that dropout is a multifaceted process influenced by various factors, including individual characteristics, family background, school environment, and societal factors (Brown et al., 2009; Gubbels et al., 2019). A meta-analysis by Gubbels et al. (2019) reveals that older age, lower academic performance, and learning difficulties are significant risk factors for students. Family-related risk factors include low socio-economic status, education, lack of daily food, clothing and footwear expenses, and an unsuitable environment for living and learning, among others. School regulations, policies, and teaching-assessment approaches are factors related to the school. Relationships with peers, the school administration and faculty teachers, and the social environment are environmental factors. Researchers believe that dropout should be analyzed as a long-term process and seen as a result of a continuous process of academic alienation (Brown et al., 2009) influenced by various personal, social and environmental factors.

Decision-making regarding dropout is predominantly unilateral, with students often responsible for their choices. In the German dual system, where trainees have employment contracts, most dropout decisions are made independently by students, although terminations by training companies also play a significant role (Greilinger, 2013).

Dropout trajectories can lead to different outcomes, including upward mobility within the education system, horizontal shifts to other educational programs, or permanent withdrawal from education altogether (Feß, 1995; Faßmann, 1998). Horizontal dropout is the most common path observed, followed by upward dropout rates, while downward dropout is relatively rare (Feß, 1995; Faßmann, 1998).

Understanding dropout dynamics in vocational education and post-dropout trajectories involves social psychological concepts such as attitudes, social identity and well-being.

*Attitudes towards Education*

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) suggests that people’s confidence in the educational program and their abilities (self-efficacy beliefs), their view of educational outcomes (outcome expectations), and the barriers to education significantly shape their attitudes towards education. Therefore, dropout rates in vocational education may be influenced by similar factors.

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985) proposes that attitudes, social norms, and perceived control over behavior influence an individual’s intentions toward behavior. A person’s dropout from vocational education may be influenced by their attitude toward education, societal norms about education, and the perception that they can succeed academically.

*Social Identity*

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals form their sense of self-based on belonging to social groups and aim for a favorable social identity. Dropout rates within vocational education can be linked to how individuals identify with their educational institution or program and how they perceive the social status associated with vocational education.

Identity-Based Motivation Theory (Oyserman & Destin, 2010) suggests that individuals’ motivations and actions are shaped by their social identities and how they align with academic

goals. Dropout in vocational education could be affected by how individuals see their education as associated with their social identities, objectives, and ambitions.

*Well-being*

According to the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), people’s innate drive for autonomy, competence, and connection with others significantly influences their motivation and happiness. Dropout rates in VET depend on how individuals perceive their level of independence and proficiency within their educational setting and their sense of belonging.

One of the essential concepts related to well-being is locus of control. Dropout rates in VET might depend on how individuals perceive their level of independence and proficiency within their educational setting, as well as their sense of belonging.

One of the important concepts related to well-being is locus of control.

*Locus of Control*

Locus of control refers to individuals’ beliefs about how much they can control events. According to Rotter’s (1966) social learning theory, people with an internal locus of control suppose that they can control their lives, including educational outcomes, while those with an external locus of control attribute outcomes to external factors beyond their influence. Previous studies have shown that individuals with an internal locus of control tend to have a higher level of well-being. In comparison, people with an external locus of control might have a lower level of well-being (Lachman & Weaver, 1998).

**Research Methodology**

This study utilized a mixed methods approach to investigate the dynamics of dropout in vocational education and post-dropout trajectories. The research was conducted from April to June 2023 and included both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. A mixed-methods approach allowed for the integration of statistical analysis and in-depth qualitative insights, enhancing the robustness and depth of the findings.

*Data Collection and Sample*

The data collection focused on former Vocational Education and Training (VET) students who discontinued their studies between 2018 and 2022.

We obtained contact information for 420 VET dropouts from VET colleges from 2018 to 2022 who had expressed a willingness to participate in the study. We contacted these individuals to explain the study’s objectives and sent the questionnaire only to those who confirmed their willingness to participate. Participants were provided with complete information about the research and had the right to withdraw at any stage. In total, 300 students agreed, resulting in a response rate of 71.4%. The sample consisted of 57% women and 43% men, with a mean age of 28 years (SD = 10.22); 45% had attained higher education and 39.8% had completed secondary education. Approximately two-thirds (66.5%) were employed, and over half (52.8%) were single.

Focus groups were selected to gather in-depth qualitative data that complemented the quantitative survey data. The focus group discussions were guided by a semi-structured protocol designed to elicit rich and detailed responses while allowing flexibility for participants to introduce new themes. The guide included the following key topics:

- 1. Reasons for Dropping Out
- 2. Post-Dropout Experiences
- 3. Socioeconomic Influences
- 4. Attitudes Towards Education and Employment

5. Social Identity and Well-being
6. Support Needs and Recommendations

### *Instrument and Procedure*

The survey research was conducted following ethical norms in a self-administered form. All respondents provided “informed” consent to participate in the research. They were fully informed about the research’s aim and could stop participating at any stage.

The research utilized a telephone survey approach using a specifically designed questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 50 predominantly closed-ended items and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Explicit provisions regarding research objectives, sampling procedures, anonymity, and confidentiality were outlined; implicit consent was obtained from participants.

The questionnaire included inquiries concerning demographic characteristics, reasons for discontinuing enrollment and obstacles to continued education. Dropout rationales were classified into push, pull, and falling-out factors, following established frameworks (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt & Roessingh, 1994). Additionally, the survey explored post-dropout trajectories, including upward, horizontal, and downward trajectories.

Moreover, the questionnaire incorporated adapted assessment tools to evaluate vocational students’ attitudes towards Vocational Education and Training (VET), Higher Education and employment, social identity, well-being and locus of control.

**Attitude towards VET**, Higher Education, employment and self-employment were measured on a 7-point scale where (-3) was very negative and (+3) very positive evaluations.

**Social identity** was measured using Weimeich’s (1980) social identity instrument. Eleven relevant descriptive constructs were selected from previous research (Kitiashvili et al., 2022). Researchers identified eleven items measured on a 7-point Osgood’s Semantic differential scale. These scales were

1. Friendly - Unfriendly
2. Happy - Unhappy
3. Pessimistic - Optimistic
4. Popular - Unpopular
5. Passive - Active
6. Able to take initiative - Unable to take initiative
7. Wealthy - Unhealthy
8. Talented - Not talented
9. Uneducated - Educated
10. Successful - Unsuccessful
11. Dependent - Independent ( $\alpha = .865$ ).

Respondents first evaluated themselves on the scale, then the peers who quit Education and lastly, the peers who continued Education.

**Well-being** was measured on two scales: self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) and life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1996). The questionnaire used the Rosenberg 10-point self-assessment scale (1965), which was adapted to the Georgian language (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .73$ ) (Sumbadze et al., 2012). A 7-point scale of life satisfaction adapted to the Georgian language was used in tandem.

Locus of Control was measured using Roter’s scale adapted to the Georgian language (Sumbadze et al., 2012). The scale measures an individual’s perception of control over events in their life. There are 16 pairs of 29 statements in the scale, of which 23 measure locus of control, and 6 are complementary statements. The scale requires the respondent to select from each pair of statements (“A” and “B”) the statement that best represents either an internal or external locus of control, depending on which statement they agree with more. The scale was adapted to the Georgian language (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .65$ ).

Nine focus groups were conducted, with participants selected from a pool of 300 former VET students who had responded to the survey. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in socioeconomic status, dropout duration, and post-dropout trajectories. The focus groups were held in a neutral,

comfortable setting to encourage open and honest discussion. Each session lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. The moderator used a semi-structured guide to steer the conversation, probing deeper into interesting or emerging themes. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants’ consent. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim for detailed analysis.

*Data Analysis*

The survey responses from 300 former VET students were input into SPSS. Data cleaning processes were undertaken to ensure consistency, including handling missing data, checking for outliers, and verifying the validity of the responses.

Descriptive statistics provided an overview of the sample population and the context of their dropout scenarios, such as the participants’ demographics (e.g., age, socioeconomic status) and the characteristics of their dropout experiences (e.g., duration, reasons for dropout). T-tests were used to identify statistically significant differences in attitudes, social identity, and well-being between groups. Correlation analysis determined the relationship between variables on an interval scale. Logistic regression analyses were performed to determine the predictors of post-dropout trajectories. Social identity, attitudes towards VET and Higher Education (HE), and well-being were included to assess their impact on the likelihood of upward, horizontal, or downward dropout trajectories.

The qualitative data from the nine focus groups were transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were then coded for themes and patterns related to the study’s objectives.

The focus group data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to students’ dropout experiences and post-dropout pathways. This qualitative approach provided deeper insights into the reasons behind dropout and the factors influencing students’ decisions.

**Research Results**

*Characteristics of Dropout Students*

The current survey revealed that students terminated their studies within an average of 5.4 months, ranging from a minimum of 1 day to a maximum of 2.5 years. Notably, approximately one-third of students ceased their studies within a month, while more than one-fifth discontinued between 2 to 4 months. The majority (about 3/4) of students dropped out within 6 months. The majority of the respondents perceived their socioeconomic status as average, with a common statement - we have money to buy household appliances, but we cannot buy a car (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Profile of Students Who Dropped Out*

Characteristics	
Drop out period	Average 5.4 months
Average age	28 (SD=10.2)
Gender	1. Female - 57% 2. Male - 43%
Education	1. 9th grade (basic education) - 4.3% 2. Grade 12 (secondary education) - 39.8% 3. Vocational education - 11.0% 4 Higher education - 44.9%
Marital Status	1. Single - 52.8% 2. Married - 40.9% 3. We live together but are not married - 2.4% 4. Divorced - 3.9%

Characteristics	
Employment status	1. Unemployed, looking for a job - 20.1% 2. Unemployed, not looking for a job -13.4% 3. Employed -66.5% 4. Self-employed - 9.1%
Social-Economic status	1. Very high (we do not experience material problems, if necessary we can buy an apartment or country house) -0.4% 2. High (we can buy everything, except an apartment, country house and luxury items) -6.8% 3. Average (we have money to buy household appliances, but we cannot buy a car) -83.3% 4. Low (we have money for food, but buying clothes is a big problem) – 8.0% 5. Very low (we barely make ends meet from month to month, we don't have money for food) -1.6%

The survey identified the following as the top five reasons (see Table 2) for dropping out:

1. Inflexible program schedule
2. Unfavorable location of the school
3. Employment commitments
4. Financial difficulties, including expenses related to transportation and accommodation
5. Life events such as marriage, divorce, or parenthood.

**Table 2**  
*Reasons for Dropping Out*

Reason for dropping out	%
Unfavorable location of the school	15
Too many theoretical issues	5
Lack of practical courses	1
Low quality of teaching	2
Less qualified teachers	1
Inflexible schedule of the program	15
Suspension status	1
Marriage-divorce, marital status, having a child	8
Financial problems (related to travel, accommodation)	8
studied elsewhere at the same time, continuing my studies at another institution	7
Health problem	6
Lack of desire/interest	2
Employment	11
Various personal problems (army, sports, serving a sentence, age)	4



Reason for dropping out	%
Migration to another country	4
The pandemic and online learning	4
Lack of time	6

In focus group interviews, students, employers, directors of vocational colleges and teachers mentioned similar reasons for dropping out. From this point of view, their perceptions are not sharply different. Specifically, the reasons they identified for college dropouts can be divided into four main categories: (such as curricula, school availability), family (family responsibilities, children, marriage, divorce), individual (motives and interests), and community-related dropout factors (stereotypes).

As proposed by our hypotheses (H1 and H2), the primary factors contributing to college dropout tend to be external, particularly pull factors. Through focus groups and interviews involving students, employers, vocational college directors, and teachers, a consensus emerged regarding the reasons for dropout, indicating a convergence of perspectives. These reasons can be categorized into institutional, family, individual, and community-related factors. Importantly, our findings suggest that gender and institutional type (public or private) do not significantly influence dropout decisions. Notably, the majority of students opted to discontinue their studies autonomously, as illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Decision to Stop Studying and its Evaluation*

		%
1	<b>Decision about termination of study</b>	
	Independently	96
	Under the influence of parents	2.0
	Under the influence of teachers	1
	Under the influence of his wife	1
2	<b>How correct was the decision</b>	
	The correct decision	41
	Partially correct decision	39
	Incorrect decision	20

The majority of respondents express agreement with or partial agreement with the decision, while approximately one-fifth express regret, perceiving it as incorrect. Gender analysis reveals a significant association between gender and dropout decision evaluation ( $\chi^2(3) = 11.8, p < .05$ ), with a higher percentage of men (85%) viewing the decision as correct or partially correct compared to women (75%). Conversely, more women (25%) consider the decision incorrect than men (15%). Focus group discussions also confirmed this tendency.

*“If it were the same time, I would not and could not change this decision because I would have the same problem again, I could not leave my job or my children. The period before the pandemic was 2018, and if I could have studied remotely then, I would not have left under any circumstances.”*  
(Former student of Public Vocational College).

Regarding consultation with career counselors or psychologists, a minimal percentage of students had the opportunity to do so before (5%), during (2%), or after (2%) making the decision to drop out, indicating a lack of informed decision-making.

Institutional factors emerge as primary reasons for dropout, encompassing barriers within vocational colleges, workplace, and social policy, such as inflexible program schedules and limited

school availability. Employer perspectives underscore the importance of accommodating students' work schedules, albeit dependent on the industry. Challenges related to transportation, food, and housing further exacerbate dropout rates, particularly among financially disadvantaged students, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Family-related factors, including changes in residence, balancing family responsibilities, and marital status, contribute to dropout decisions, especially among married individuals. Societal gender stereotypes and ethnic customs also influence dropout rates, with societal attitudes favoring university education over vocational education.

Many students express regret over their decision to drop out, citing financial, professional, or family-related constraints. Employment prospects are perceived as challenging, with factors such as lack of work experience, language skills, and nepotism contributing to unemployment rates. However, despite these challenges, students remain motivated to pursue further education or seek employment, with some expressing aspirations for entrepreneurship.

Survey data forecasts a notable proportion, up to one-third (33.5%) of young individuals, intending to pursue vocational education within the next 2-3 years. A smaller fraction (15%) opt for higher education, while 28.7% prioritize immediate employment (1). A minority expressed aspirations for self-employment (2.8%) or simultaneous work and study (2.8%), while 16.7% remain undecided regarding their educational and occupational trajectories.

*“With higher education, what I observe now is that many people are not employed, even though they have many degrees at home. I would prefer professional education, which does not take much time and has the shortest term.”* (Former student of a Private Vocational College)

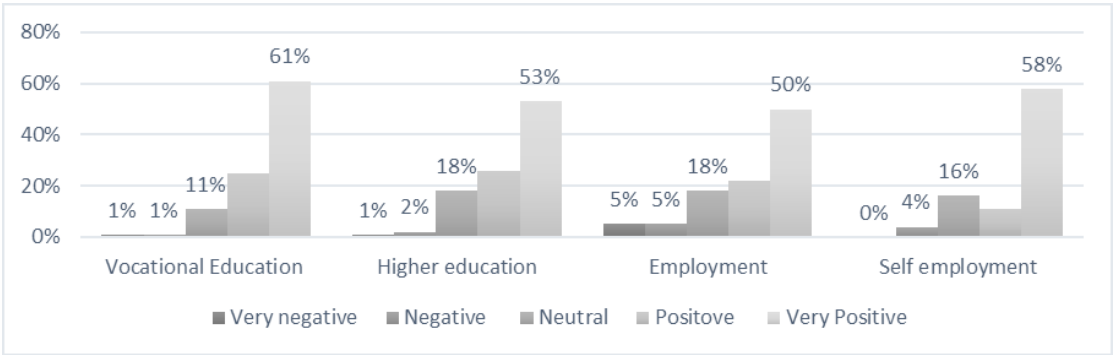
*„I have quite big goals, because I can repair phones, I want to buy equipment for mobile phones and make a small facility, then I want to expand, sell different parts, add accessories. . .”* (Former student of a Public Vocational College).

Attitudes, Social Identity and Well-being

Social-psychological factors such as attitudes towards education and employment, social identity and well-being can provide a significant contribution to understanding dropout rates in Vocational Education.

Figure 1 shows that students have the most positive attitudes towards VET, followed by self-employment, HE and employment. The findings indicate a noteworthy correlation wherein a growing number of students opt for vocational education post-secondary schooling. Nevertheless, a significant portion, approximately 70%, do not pursue further education (Hypothesis 3). This suggests a pronounced decline in educational continuation, alongside comparable rates of upward mobility and lateral movement within the educational sphere.

Figure 1  
Students' Attitudes towards Education and Employment



Evidence collected from focus groups within the current research suggests that students exhibit a favorable disposition towards pursuing education, perceiving it as an essential avenue for self-enhancement, realization, employment, and economic advancement.

*“I believe that education not only has a great contribution to people’s lives, but also that education is necessary in order for a person to become a professional in his field. Now I myself have only received secondary education, many may think that education is not important for me based on this level, however, this is not the case at all. (Former student of Public Vocational College).*

They assert the indispensability of education for professional attainment, emphasizing its role in navigating the complexities of the contemporary job market and meeting evolving demands.

A reliable difference was observed in attitudes towards VET between the groups with different drop-out trajectories. The most positive attitudes were observed in the group who continued their studies in VET, followed by the group who ultimately left the educational system ( $M=4.52$  and  $4.492$  respectively) ( $F = 2.839$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Thus, these findings confirm Hypothesis 4.

*Social Identity*

Young people’s social identity was closer to the group of students who dropped out from VET than other students.

A reliable difference was observed in social identity between the groups with different drop-out trajectories. The most positive social identity was observed in the group who continued their studies in VET, followed by the group who completely left the educational system ( $M = 1$  and  $1.19$  respectively) ( $F = 5.65$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Thus, these findings confirm Hypothesis 5.

*Well-being*

The self-assessment of respondents was close to the national assessment (29.54;  $SD=4.2$ ). Results indicate that a majority of respondents (62%) express satisfaction with themselves, while 8% report dissatisfaction. Similarly, 70% of respondents are satisfied with their overall life, with 10% expressing dissatisfaction. These findings align with previous research suggesting a positive correlation between self-assessment and well-being (Diener, 2000).

A maximum well-being score can be 200 (40 self-esteem x5 life satisfaction), while the research participant’s score was 120.59 (30.92 self-esteem x3.9 life satisfaction), which was slightly higher than an average score.

A reliable difference was observed in well-being between the groups with different drop-out trajectories; The highest well-being rate was observed in the group who continued their studies in VET, followed by the group who left the educational system ( $M = 17.0385$  and  $14.9423$  respectively), ( $F = 4.804$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

*Locus of Control*

Furthermore, a significant proportion of young individuals (83%) perceive high control over their lives, consistent with Rotter’s (1966) concept of internal locus of control. This belief in personal agency has been linked to greater levels of life satisfaction and well-being (Lefcourt, 1976). Conversely, only 3% of respondents disagree with controlling their life circumstances. This disparity underscores the influence of individual differences in locus of control on subjective well-being.

*Correlational and Regression Analysis*

Table 4 demonstrates that attitudes towards vocational education were positively correlated with attitudes towards Higher education ( $r = .219$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This suggests that individuals with more positive attitudes towards vocational education also hold positive attitudes towards higher education.

**Table 4**  
*Correlational Analysis*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	7	8
Attitudes towards VET	4.45	.80						-.072	.001
Attitude towards HE	4.2	.95	.219**					-.018	.067
Attitudes towards employment	4.0	1.15	.020	.193**				-.035	.104
Social identity	2.38	.97	.084	-.104	-.058			-.009	.001
Well-being	15.05	6.27	-.063	.025	.060	-.024		.777**	.811
Locus of control	19.27	4.00	.096	.022	.008	.014	.256**	.210**	.276**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2 -tailed)  
\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2 -tailed)  
*M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

Similarly, attitudes towards higher education showed a positive correlation with employment ( $r = .193, p < .01$ ), indicating that individuals with more positive attitudes towards higher education also tend to display positive attitudes towards employment.

Furthermore, attitudes towards employment demonstrated a positive correlation with attitudes towards self-employment ( $r = .625, p < .01$ ); this suggests that individuals with positive attitudes towards employment tend to show positive attitudes towards self-employment as well.

Well-being exhibited a moderate positive correlation with locus of control ( $r = .256, p < .05$ ), and a stronger positive relationship with self-assessment ( $r = .777, p < .05$ ), and an even stronger relationship with life satisfaction ( $r = .811, p < .05$ ); the last two correlations were expected as self-assessment and life satisfaction are indicators of well-being.

Life satisfaction had a strong positive correlation with well-being ( $r = .811, p < .05$ ), a weaker positive relationship with locus of control ( $r = .276, p < .05$ ), and with self-assessment ( $r = .315, p < .05$ ).

The relationship between dropout trajectory and variables such as attitudes, well-being, social identity and locus of control was analyzed.

The multinomial logistic regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the post dropout trajectory and independent variables including well-being, social identity, and attitudes towards VET, HE and employment. The analysis was conducted on a sample of 300 individuals.

The findings show that the model fits the data adequately  $\chi^2(1, N = 54,960) = 54,960, p < .05$ ; McFadden's  $R^2 = .881$ ; Cox and Snell's  $R^2 = .771$ .

The analysis showed that social identity, attitudes towards VET and attitudes towards higher education were significant predictors of an upward post-dropout trajectory.

**Discussion**

This study explores the dynamics of dropout and post-dropout trajectories of young people in vocational education and training (VET) with a particular emphasis on attitudes, social identity, and well-being.

The dropout profile of vocational education and training (VET) students indicates a correlation with their perceived socio-economic status, with those evaluating their status as average being more likely to drop out (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). Additionally, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to leave the institution sooner. The study by Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman emphasizes the importance of socioeconomic status in determining the chance of dropping out (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). Their results, which highlight the impact of perceived socioeconomic position on dropout decisions and timing, are in line with the findings of the current study. This result is consistent with other studies that suggest academic achievement

and socioeconomic status are frequent markers of students who may be at risk of dropping out (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002).

Furthermore, building on the findings of Neild and Balfanz (2006) can contribute to a more comprehensive comprehension of the temporal dynamics associated with the dropout process, illuminating the elements that contribute to the mean duration of 5.4 months prior to dropout. As Tinto's model makes clear, it's critical to take into account how push and pull variables interact while examining the causes of dropout decisions. The framework developed by Tinto sheds light on the ways in which students' decisions to leave school are influenced by both internal and external factors. Incorporating the research of academics such as Bean and Metzner (1985) can further enhance the examination of situational, institutional, and dispositional obstacles faced by vocational and early training students.

The decision to drop out is typically not immediate, with an average time of 5.4 months from starting studies to dropout. This timeframe aligns with previous studies indicating a process lasting 1-3 years before students ultimately leave (Allensworth, 2005; Neild & Balfanz, 2006). The decision to dropout is often driven by a cost-benefit analysis, where perceived benefits of leaving outweigh the losses. Pull factors, such as job opportunities, play a significant role in this decision, followed by some push factors.

As the research hypothesis suggested, dropout reasons were not related to low motivation or negative attitudes towards education. Instead, students viewed education as essential for self-development, employment, and economic growth, with a particularly positive view of VET due to its perceived relevance to their goals. Barriers to completing VET were predominantly situational and institutional rather than dispositional. Situational barriers included time constraints and family responsibilities, while institutional barriers encompassed access issues and procedural challenges. Dispositional barriers, such as motivation and self-esteem generally are more under students' control. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985) behavior is determined by intentions, which are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms (social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior), and perceived behavioral control (self-efficacy). Thus, to promote educational behaviors, interventions should target these factors: enhancing positive attitudes towards education, emphasizing social norms that support academic engagement, and building students' confidence in their ability to succeed academically.

The dominant tendency among dropouts is the "downward dropout," often attributed to high academic demands and limited job prospects. Many students regret their decision to drop out later, indicating a lack of informed decision-making especially among women.

"Downward dropout" is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, which explores how future prospects and academic expectations shape educational pathways. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital—a collection of behaviors, knowledge, and skills that are highly valued by society—has a significant influence on how well students do in school. Challenges such as insufficient finances, restricted support systems, and societal prejudices might make it more difficult for students from underprivileged families to succeed academically. Despite their aptitude, these students frequently encounter a phenomenon where they become disengaged from their studies or go down the academic ladder as a result of these structural hurdles. Gaining insight from Bourdieu's viewpoint highlights how these dynamics impact educational performance and emphasizes the necessity of fair educational policies and support mechanisms to lessen these differences.

Factors related to social psychology, such as attitudes toward VET and HE and employment, social identity, and well-being, can play an important role in dropout trajectories.

As the hypotheses suggested the most positive attitudes, positive social identity and well-being were observed in the group of students who continued their studies in VET, followed by the group who completely left the educational system.

Social identity, attitudes towards VET, and attitudes towards Higher Education and employment were significant predictors of upward post - dropout trajectory.

Attitudes toward education, and future prospects significantly affect not only coping and dropout rates, but also post-dropout trajectories. Positive attitudes promote resilience and motivation in the face of various barriers, reduce dropout risks, and promote upward transition after dropout.

Social identity, which includes factors such as peer influence, cultural background, and socioeconomic status significantly impacts educational outcomes. Students' identification with their educational community can facilitate or hinder their resilience to barriers. Understanding the dynamics of social identity is critical to fostering inclusive educational environments and empowering students from diverse backgrounds.

Well-being is emerging as a critical determinant of dropout and post-dropout trajectories. Psychological well-being, including emotional resilience and coping mechanisms, affects students' responses to challenges and obstacles. Moreover, proactively addressing well-being concerns can enhance academic engagement, contributing to a more positive educational experience.

Expanding on the role of social psychology in dropout trajectories, Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (1979) offers a framework for analyzing how individuals' identification with social groups influences their educational experiences. The intricate interactions between social identity, attitudes toward education, and post-dropout trajectories can be better understood by incorporating the theory's observations. Moreover, using studies by Fredricks and Eccles (2006) helps improve our comprehension of the ways in which students' resilience and psychological well-being are impacted by their academic engagement. Their research highlights how crucial it is to meet students' emotional and psychological needs and create a good learning environment to mitigate dropout risks and foster successful educational outcomes.

By incorporating perspectives from a range of scholars and studies, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of dropout and post-dropout trajectories in VET as well as identify strategies for promoting retention, resilience, and academic success among diverse student populations.

Conclusions and Implications

By exploring attitudes, social -identity, well-being and locus of control, this study highlights the importance of addressing students' psychological needs and promoting a supportive learning environment to enhance retention and success in VET programs.

The decision to drop-out typically involves a cost-benefit analysis often influenced by job opportunities and financial benefits. Students generally appreciate education for self-development and career growth, especially vocational education and training (VET), in contrast to poor motivation and unfavorable views. Barriers to completion are mostly situational (such as time constraints) and institutional (such as access issues) rather than dispositional (such as motivation). Many dropouts regret their decision because they miss out on the opportunities to acquire skills and thus gain employment opportunities in high-paying positions. Social psychological factors significantly affect dropout and post-dropout decisions. Students who pursue vocational education exhibit the highest levels of positive attitudes and overall well-being.

The findings contribute to new knowledge of how social psychological concepts can be applied in educational settings which is a promising direction. An application of this study is the development of comprehensive strategies that integrate positive attitudes, social identity, and well-being into the educational experience. The study underscores the importance of a supportive learning environment that addresses students' needs. By promoting positive student attitudes toward education, fostering an inclusive social environment that embraces diversity and belonging, and prioritizing the overall well-being of students, educational institutions can not only enhance student success but also significantly reduce dropout rates, and support smoother transitions into further education and employment.

Policymakers and practitioners can use these insights to develop targeted interventions to foster student engagement in vocational education and training. It is essential to raise awareness about the risks of student dropout and the benefits of completing professional education. Early career guidance, particularly in general education, is crucial, and career services should be tailored to individual needs, considering socioeconomic and demographic factors. Effective communication, including social media, can enhance enrollment and reduce attrition. Creating a supportive, inclusive environment with flexible scheduling, extracurricular activities, and support services can foster engagement and motivation.

### Limitations and Future Directions

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of our study, including the relatively small sample size and the cross-sectional nature of the data. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to better understand the causal relationships between the variables over time.

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